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The infant sleep myth

Durham University's Parent-Infant Sleep Lab has received Royal approval for its research.

Professor Helen Ball explains how the Lab's work on perceptions of infant sleep and how parents manage night-time infant care is making a difference to parents and their children

COPING WITH SLEEP disruption is one of the most difficult aspects of parenting a new baby, and one for which first-time parents are often ill-prepared.

Anticipation during pregnancy of a baby that loves to sleep in its carefully prepared crib is rarely borne out by reality, and research has shown that unrealistic expectations are often reinforced by well-wishers and extended family members: even complete strangers seem to take an avid interest in whether new babies are 'good' and sleep 'through the night'.

Initially most parents follow a path of least resistance, implementing strategies that minimise their own sleep disruption while meeting their baby's night-time needs. These might involve shifting their bedtimes to match their baby's sleep times, bringing the baby into their bed, sleeping on a mattress next to the baby's cot, or alternating night-time care between parents.

Although met with initial sympathy, parents soon find themselves receiving substantial criticism and advice if their flexible adaptations for coping with baby-related sleep disruption extend for more than a few weeks.

New parents report they are chastised for not having their babies 'in a routine', for not allowing them to 'self-soothe', and for not implementing a 'sleep training' regime. Parents often reveal that they lie to family, friends and health professionals to avoid a telling-off.

All of these recommendations for creating a 'good baby', however, are products of a particular set of cultural values regarding the night-time needs of babies, prominent in countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia that are not found elsewhere in the world.

This apparent Anglo-American obsession with babies' sleep means that sooner or later many parents wonder whether their baby has a sleep problem, or worse, is naughty and wilfully refusing to sleep.

Night-time then becomes a battle-ground with parents pitting the pursuit of a 'decent night's sleep' against their babies' biological needs for contact, comfort and regular night-time feeds. As a result, babies may be medicalised, medicated, punished and, in extreme cases, abused for displaying typical human-infant behaviour (waking at night, requiring night-feeding, crying when left alone).

For parents the mismatch between cultural expectations and the reality of their new baby can result in distress, anxiety and postpartum depression, fuelling confusion and conflict within families. Research has found that mothers with poorer mental health believe their infants have more night waking and bedtime distress, are more bothered by these sleep issues, and seek more treatment for their infants' sleep problems. Parents with poor sleep also over-report sleep problems in their children.

The problem is that parents of 700,000 babies born annually in the UK currently receive no clear information, either before or after the birth of their child, about normal patterns of infant sleep development, or how to cope with infant-related sleep disruption, while also keeping infant sleep environments safe. In turn, health professionals receive little to no training on normal infant sleep or parental sleep issues, and consequently struggle to provide appropriate information and support.

Durham University's Parent-Infant Sleep Lab aims to rectify this.

For the past 20 years anthropologists at Durham University have worked with more than 5,000 parents and babies, to learn how parents manage night-time infant care, what their perceptions of infant sleep are, and how parents' coping strategies, infant feeding methods, and infant sleep safety intersect. In 2011 they took on the challenge of using this research knowledge to help improve parents' understanding of their babies' sleep.





The goal was to make the latest information on infant sleep development, infant sleep safety, and night-time parenting freely available to anyone with access to the internet – and to raise the prominence of infants' biological needs to help frame realistic expectations.

With ESRC Follow-On Funding, the team worked with research-users from three parent-support charities (UNICEF UK, La Leche League, and NCT) to establish the Infant Sleep Information Source website, launched in March 2012.

The website, which has been accessed more than two million times across the world, is endorsed by several parent-infant support charities and is signposted to parents by NHS Choices, a host of NHS Trusts, and the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence.

User-research revealed the website was frequently read by parents using mobile phones (often while feeding/settling infants in the small hours), so funding was provided by Durham University to develop the Infant Sleep Info app

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to make access to this information even easier. As knowledge of the website and app has grown the team has begun to offer workshops for health professionals who wish to support parents in managing their expectations and coping with normal infant-related sleep disruption.

The Infant Sleep Information Source does not address clinical sleep problems, nor does it provide individual infant sleep advice. However, parents report finding the information provided to be 'reassuring', 'life-altering', and 'sanity-saving'. Health professionals, meanwhile report that it gives them confidence to discuss infant sleep with parents and colleagues, and that it is an authoritative source of information to which they point new parents.

In recognition of the success of the team's work, in February 2018, the Parent-Infant Sleep Lab team and Durham University received the Queen's Anniversary Prize for 'leading influential research on parent infant sleep with a widely-used public information service'.

The team hopes that gradually the myth of the somnolent 'good baby' may be consigned to the past, and parents will receive the information and support they need to enjoy the start of their parenting journey without feeling compelled to lie about, or 'fix' their perfectly normal baby. ■



i Professor Helen Ball is Director of the Parent-Infant Sleep Lab in the Department of Anthropology at Durham University. The Infant Sleep Information Source website can be found at: www.isisonline.org.uk or www.infantsleepinfo.org.uk. The Infant Sleep Info app is available on Google Play and iTunes. Reviews for the Infant Sleep Information Source website can be found at: facebook.com/pg/ISISonline/reviews/. More information about the Durham Parent-Infant Sleep Lab can be found at: www.durham.ac.uk/sleep.lab/